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ABSTRACT

It is regularly claimed that the quality of writing done by college freshmen is declining. This study attempted, through the use of questionnaires and interviews, to determine what specific freshman writing problems English teaching assistants and English professors at the University of Texas viewed as most serious. Questionnaire results showed serious concern for the lack of precision and detail in student writing, for failure to proofread and revise, for failure to use transitions, and for failure to organize information effectively. In the interviews, professors stressed the importance of students using a personal voice in their writing and the importance of students writing for their peers. Professors also argued that a greater amount of writing should be done by high school students even if all the writing were not graded by the teacher. (Author/AA)

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What Johnny Can't Write: A University View of Freshman Writing Ability

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During the golden age of university expansion in the 60's, English Composition was often the course used by the universities to "weed out" those "unfit" for higher education. In Ohio some of the duly-weeded went back to their high schools with tales of freshman teachers who would read their papers until the third mechanical error, then automatically stop and give the paper an F. Such stories, no doubt, made some high school teachers uncomfortable. Anxious for their students' success, they eyed papers more carefully to prevent those misspellings that might become the fatal third error. Such horror stories may not have been true, or they may have been true in only isolated cases. But at any rate, they were usually the best information concerning Freshman Composition that secondary English teachers had.

In recent years, heavily-credentialed educators have taken to speaking ex cathedra on declining standards.[1] Usually, this amounts to the claim that "Freshmen can't write." Sometimes they attempt to clarify this by using the nebulous phrase "a lack of basics." But again, this isn't much help. As we see it, writing--like getting money back from a vending company--is one of the most complex of human activities, involving a dizzying range of skills. While we do not dispute the general claim that freshmen have writing problems, we do argue that unless those involved in teaching Freshman Composition are more precise about the specific weaknesses their students exhibit, the complaints will have little more than cathartic value.

Such precision was attempted in the recent National Assessment

of Educational Progress report on writing, though it is actually of little value in looking at the writing of college freshmen. It reports a decline among 17-year-olds over the 1969-74 period, in "over-all quality," word length (an indication of vocabulary diversity), and in paragraph coherence.[2] Yet only one essay was written by each student in the sample, and the essays averaged only 137 words (about the length of the first paragraph in this article). In addition, the essay topics lacked purposeful focus,[3] and the students had limited time for revision. It is clear that there are significant differences between the type of writing done for the NAEP and that required of college freshmen.

In order to determine which writing weaknesses teachers perceive as most serious, we questioned a number of Freshmen Composition teachers at the University of Texas at Austin. The UT Freshman English program is one of the largest in the country; about 70% of the entering Freshman class, or approximately 4,500 students, who score below 550 on the College Entrance Examination Board (CEEB) English Composition Test are required to take two Freshman Composition courses. These are usually taught by graduate assistants, most working on their Ph.D. and some working on their M.A. degree.[4]

Near the end of the spring semester (1977) we sent questionnaires to 59 graduate assistants who teach Freshman Composition. At this point in the academic year even first-year teaching assistants had taught at least three sections (of about 25 students each). Of the 59 questionnaires sent out, 29 were returned. We also gave the questionnaire to three of the full-time English faculty who are involved in the Composition Program and to the Assistant Director of Freshman English, an experienced graduate assistant. After completing

the form each of the four instructors was interviewed about his perception of weaknesses in student writing. In all, 33 questionnaires were returned and tallied.

The questionnaires consisted of 41 statements of writing problems, statements reproduced in Table 1. The respondents were asked to make two judgments per statement. They were first asked to agree or disagree on a scale of 1 (agree strongly) to 7 (disagree strongly). They were then asked to rate the seriousness of the problem on a scale of 1 (serious problem) to 7 (no problem). A serious problem had to have three characteristics; first, it had to be a major stumbling block and not a peripheral annoyance. Second, it had to be a general problem, not limited to remedial cases. Third, it had to be a problem, which, in the opinion of the respondents, could have been taken care of in high school English classes.

To keep the questionnaire to a reasonable size, we limited it to 41 statements of writing problems. First, we defined 14 problem areas, then developed one or more statements for each area. The problem areas are listed below:

Problems with attitude

Problems with pre-writing

Problems with writing the term paper and in reference work

Problems with audience

Problems with voice

Problems with word choice

Problems with sentence construction

Problems with hearing written language

Problems with supporting detail

Problems with logic

Problems with writing mechanics

Problems with grammar

Problems with organization

Problems with paragraph coherence

Problems with re-writing and proofreading

Realizing that any list of this type is incomplete, we added another item which asked the respondent to select three problems that he felt were most serious. Here, if he wished, he could add a statement of his own if he felt our list excluded an important problem. Several respondents took advantage of this.

There are three major limitations to this survey. First, many Freshman English teachers have little understanding of the difficulties of high school teaching. Their expectations may, for this reason, be unrealistic from the secondary teacher's point of view. Second, the results are drawn from the freshman program of one state university. It is possible that surveys of other freshman programs would produce different results. Finally, the statements do not represent discrete, totally separable skills; there are numerous cause-effect relationships. For example, problems in word choice may be due to the fact that the student feels constrained to avoid the personal topics with which he is familiar.

The results of the survey are presented in Table 1. The numbers indicate the average responses for the statement, the lower the number the stronger the agreement or the more serious the problem. The results of item 42, which asked respondents to list the three major

Table 1: Teacher Rating of Freshmen Writing Problems

Rank	Statement	A-D*	Seriousness
1.	Students fail to provide supporting details for their statements.	1.60	1.72
2.	Students do not revise their writing. Very few changes are made after the first draft.	1.54	1.74
3.	Students use imprecise language.	1.33	1.84
4.	Students fail to use transitions to develop paragraph coherence.	1.84	2.24
5.	Students are unable to organize their information into unified paragraphs.	2.19	2.30
6.	Students fail to proofread their papers.	1.79	2.41
7.	Students fail to hear the sentences they write (e.g., He stepped on the accelerator and the car accelerated up the street.).	1.61	2.52
8.	Students are unaware of the principles of deductive logic (e.g., examining the premises of an argument).	1.96	2.61
9.	Students weaken their sentences by using the passive voice and by beginning their sentences with "There is..." and "It is..."	1.76	2.64
9.	Students do not enjoy writing.	2.27	2.64
11.	Students fail to vary their sentence patterns.	1.97	2.75
11.	Students use sentences where faulty subordination confuses meaning (e.g., Then again there are more jobs of which I'm sure of that are going down in demand that you can choose of.)	2.39	2.75
13.	Students are unaware of the principles of inductive logic (i.e., determining whether evidence supports a conclusion.)	2.15	2.77

*A-D stands for agreement-disagreement scale

Table 1 (Continued)

Rank	Statement	A-D*	Seriousness
14.	Student sentences lack complexity. Students fail to combine simple sentences into more complex sentences.	2.16	2.78
15.	Students lack experience writing for an interested adult (as opposed to adult as examiner).	1.94	2.81
16.	Students are aware of only one organizational pattern--the five paragraph theme.	2.54	2.87
16.	Students do not do any written prefiguring (e.g., informal outlines).	2.69	2.87
18.	Students automatically assume that their audience agrees with their value systems (e.g., they may assume that just to label an idea "socialist" is to discredit it).	2.87	2.91
19.	Students fail to use clincher sentences at the end of paragraphs to develop paragraph coherence.	2.06	2.93
20.	Students lack experience writing for their peers.	1.85	2.94
21.	Students use sentence fragments.	2.45	3.03
22.	Students cannot identify logical fallacies.	2.39	3.19
23.	Students use run-on sentences.	2.65	3.27
24.	Students overuse cliches (e.g. In today's troubled world....).	2.84	3.35
25.	Students fail to adequately limit their topics.	2.39	3.36
26.	Students lack experience writing for themselves.	2.33	3.38
27.	Students fail to use word repetition to develop paragraph coherence.	2.75	3.41
28.	Students fail to use topic sentences to develop paragraph coherence.	3.67	3.44

Table 1 (Continued)

Rank	Statement	A-D	Seriousness
29.	Students do not know how to write a term paper.	2.27	3.47
30.	Students cannot write in a formal objective style (i.e., personal colloquial language intrudes into the writing).	3.06	3.63
31.	Students do not know how to use basic reference materials (thesaurus, readers' guide, encyclopedias, dictionary, bibliographies).	2.09	3.64
32.	Students fail to select topics on which they have something to say.	3.13	3.65
33.	Students use inflated language.	2.61	3.78
34.	Students do not know grammatical terminology.	1.61	3.87
35.	Students fail to use a personal voice in their writing (e.g., the reader fails to sense a human being behind the writing).	2.97	4.25
36.	Students are poor spellers.	2.67	4.30
37.	Students underuse commas.	3.25	4.34
38.	Students overuse commas.	3.93	4.48
38.	Students cannot outline formally.	3.03	4.48
40.	Students misuse end punctuation.	3.93	4.88
41.	Students are poor at capitalization.	4.49	5.34

problems, tend to support the ranking. The five most frequently-cited problems were poor organization, lack of transitions, lack of revision, failure to hear written sentences, and the inability to write for an audience.

The results shown in Table 1 suggest several possible inferences:

---Both numbers 1 and 3 seem to indicate that students often write at a high level of generality; they avoid the precise, probably concrete, word, and they similarly fail to include the details that anchor their statements in experience.

---The two "post-writing" statements, #2 and #6, were both seen as serious problems. Also, #7 could be seen as a post-writing problem, indicating the inability of the student to carefully read what he has written.

---Problems with mechanics were generally rated as not serious. This suggests that the respondents viewed errors on students' papers primarily as evidence of poor proofreading rather than as a lack of "skill" in writing mechanics.

---While respondents strongly agreed that students could not write a term paper, and that they could not use reference materials, few saw this as a serious writing problem. They may have believed that students should learn how to write term papers in college.

---The respondents strongly agreed that students did not know

grammatical terminology, but saw this as only a minor problem.

---Respondents agreed only slightly that students did not use topic sentences to develop paragraph coherence and for this reason did not rate it a major problem. They did, however, see problems with the use (or lack of use) of transitions to develop coherence as a major problem.

---It is generally assumed that one of the major problems of freshmen writers is "Engfish," a depersonalized, inflated, ultimately dishonest type of writing. The teaching assistants did not view Engfish as a major problem. They rated "inflated language" 33rd and surprisingly, they rated "students fail to use a personal voice in writing" 35th. In fact, they were more annoyed by the intrusion of personal language (see #30). Here there was sharp disagreement between teaching assistants and instructors. The instructors ranked the failure to use the personal voice as a serious problem (1.75 to the teaching assistants' 4.6), and they also saw inflated language as a problem (2.25 to teaching assistants' 4.00).

---The teaching assistants did not rate any of the audience statements very highly. For example, while they strongly agreed that students lacked experience writing for their peers, the teaching assistants saw this as only a moderate problem (3.17). The instructors saw it as one of the serious problems (1.25).

In discussions with those directing the Freshman Program, the talk often moved from a definition of specific writing problems to the basic causes of these problems. This was evident in the three most serious problems cited by James Kinneavy, Director of Freshman English:

1. Freshmen lack experience writing--for all audiences.
2. Freshmen lack reading practice--they have not seen many of the words they're trying to use used properly. In other words, their reading vocabulary is not far enough ahead of their writing vocabulary for them to use it.
3. Freshmen fail to face up to a fundamental holistic discourse situation (purpose, persona, audience, and subject).

The other three interviews elaborated on Kinneavy's first and third points, particularly the third.

One essay which has had considerable influence on rhetorically-based composition programs like the one at the University of Texas is Wayne Booth's "The Rhetorical Stance."[5] In this seminal essay, Booth argues that effective writing must establish a balance between three fundamental elements of the discourse situation (persona, audience, and subject). One imbalance, the pedant's stance, consists of ignoring the needs of the audience and the need for the writer to present himself as an interesting personality, and just presenting information about the subject. In his interview, Brooks Landon, Assistant Director of Freshman English, noted that freshmen too often feel that what they must do is simply present information, when in fact the reader is interested in the student's personal relationship to that information:

> I have had students who are almost incapable of using the first person merely because (they're told) "no one cares

> what little old you thinks." It seems to me that's exactly the opposite of the way good writing works--good writing reveals a mind at work. Most of us are interested in people first and issues second. We come to issues through people. We're led to issues through the way someone looks at them.

The other submerged element of the discourse situation is sense of audience. More interview time was spent on this problem than any other. Neal Nakadate, Associate Director of Freshman English, argued that over-reliance on "writing for the teacher" often produces an artificial style because "students don't think of the teacher as a person. They think of the teacher as a teacher." Nakadate, and in fact all those interviewed, urged that students be given practice writing for their peers:

> It may not be necessary for the student to get direct feedback from the teacher....A major problem is that high school students have not written for their peers or have not written for anyone but the teacher. They are extremely concerned with psyching the teacher with what he or she wants to hear.... If the students write with their peers in mind they pick topics that might be of interest--they eliminate the academic poses. I try to eliminate the business of writing for the teacher as one of the overriding blocks to writing....

Landon noted a different problem with audience. Sometimes the writer will assume that the benevolent reader will do all the work for him.

The student "writes for Mom." Mom understands, she accepts the students' values, she will fill in the gaps:

> They uniformly assume a friendly reader, almost a mind reader. Most of them assume the reader will share their values, their background knowledge, even their frame of mind when writing.

Over-reliance on the five-paragraph format also received criticism for some of the same reasons mentioned above--since it can cause the writer to neglect the importance of personality, purpose and audience in writing. As Nakadate observed,

> [Students] believe that if they get the formula down they can write an A paper--or worse still they think it might be an interesting paper.

He argued that organization must be seen in the context of the larger rhetorical concerns. The student should ask questions such as: How many paragraphs are necessary to develop this topic? How much explanation of this point does the particular audience need? Will the audience need a summarizing paragraph at some point so that they won't get lost?

Finally, those interviewed agreed that students simply have had too little writing experience before coming to college; they lack writing fluency. We asked the instructors how they would answer the objection that high school teachers do not have the time to grade student papers if students were to write a theme a week or even a theme every two weeks. John Trimble, author of Writing with Style, said, "I reject the notion that the teacher must grade every student paper." Landon argued that teachers often have an unrealistically high opinion of the effects of their markings on student writing:

> Even if the teacher were to be totally dishonest, and take up papers every week and not look at them, then hand them back with a little check mark at the bottom, I suspect that just the act of writing each week would help the student overcome some of the basic writing problems he had....

Trimble suggested the metaphor of the coach and athlete. The runner, for instance, does not spend all his time under the unremitting scrutiny of his coach. Most of his time is spent at practice where he is usually unsupervised or casually supervised. Most of this running "doesn't count," and the runner learns a great deal from his own informal experimentation during practice sessions. To have it any other way would create needless pressure and breed self-consciousness. Yet in the teaching of writing this is what is so often done.

It may seem in all this that we have been guilty of forgetting our audience, that unwritten but implied at the end of each paragraph is the accusation-- "And it's all your fault." Our choice of the word problem may have been a poor one since problem suggests that there is a solution. But few of the concerns expressed above can be solved. What if the student has difficulty selecting precise language--what writer doesn't? What if the student has difficulty organizing his information--what writer looks forward to this wrestling match? What if the student has difficulty meeting the needs of the audience--what writer doesn't struggle to give general meaning to personal insights? No one solves these problems once and for all; they are only momentarily subdued in the process of writing each single composition.

Writing is difficult. This bland assertion is not likely to be quoted by Eric Severeid in the near future, but it's surprising how frequently this is forgotten. Too often the writing teacher, both high school and college, is viewed as an academic exorcist whose function is essentially subtractive. He eliminates the error-producing potential of the student so that, properly exorcised and lobotomized, the student can write with "no problems." The sterile debate over who is failing to teach the student to write is evidence of this wrong-headed view. There is no quick fix that can do the trick either at the high school or the college level. The best we can hope for is the mutual recognition of serious problems, and the rejection of formulas and dry run exercises that seem to offer a short-cut.

Footnotes

1. For a particularly pompous example, see John Silber, "The Need for Elite Education," Harper's, June, 1977, pp. 22-24.
2. National Assessment of Educational Progress. Writing Mechanics, 1969-1974: A Capsule Description of Changes in Writing Mechanics. Report Number 05-w-01. Denver, Colorado: National Assessment of Educational Progress, 1975.
3. For a critique of the NAEP study see John Mellon, "Round Two of the National Writing Assessment--Interpreting the Apparent Decline in Writing Ability: A Review," Research in the Teaching of English, vol. 10, no. 1 (Spring, 1976), pp. 66-74.
4. In recent years there has been an attempt to require all full-time English faculty to teach one Freshman Composition section every three semesters. For an account of the resistance to this proposal see George Nash, "Who's Minding Freshman English at U.T. Austin?" College English, vol. 38, no. 2 (October, 1976), pp. 125-131.
5. Wayne Booth, "The Rhetorical Stance," College Composition and Communication, vol. 14 (October, 1963), pp. 139-154.